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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of mass media in the British education policy process, in particular, how the mass media steer education policy and inhibit certain issues from becoming the subject of policy. The paper describes how media professionals comprise an interest group competing with others to affect education policy; how they and other interest groups interact within the policy process; and how the discourse of media output supports the struggle between political ideologies. In particular, the conservative bias of the media inhibits the search for radical alternatives to the present range of education policies. The discussion is supplemented with findings from ongoing exploratory research funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Data were gathered from interviews with media professionals and representatives of other groups concerned with educational policy and the media, content analysis of media outputs during 1994, and a case study of a recent progressive debate in Great Britain. A conclusion is that although media professionals enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, they are constrained by dependence on other interest groups and institutions. Media output and its underlying conservative ideology are shaped by editorial policy reflecting the media ownership by a small number of multinational conglomerates, by the state-imposed legal framework, by journalistic norms for relatively pleasant new stories, and by the need to entertain a mass audience in order to secure income. There is little evidence to support a conspiracy theory among media professionals, government officials, or business leaders to tightly control the education debate and policy. Rather, the relationship itself--of relative autonomy among the media, education, the state, and the economy--appears to be the unseen hand that guides interaction among interest groups, resulting in a media contribution that is critical within limits, but also fundamentally conservative. Two figures are included. Contains 14 references. (LMI)

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# An Unseen Hand: The Mass Media and Education Policy

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# An Unseen Hand: The Mass Media and Education Policy

## Introduction

The mass media are a major means by which information related to education policy is communicated between the various interested parties. The output of the press, television and radio on education matters conveys messages between policy makers, teachers or others responsible for implementing policies, and the voters to whom these policies must ultimately be rendered acceptable. The media inform public opinion about the policies and concerns of central government politicians and, conversely, inform politicians about public perceptions of existing policies or demands for change. Do media professionals such as journalists and programme editors act merely as a conduit conveying others' messages, or do they act as a gatekeeper governing which messages are conveyed? Do they, even, represent a distinctive interest group with their own messages which contribute to the form that education policies may take?

The purpose of this paper is to assert that the mass media in Britain are both an integral part of the process of formulating and implementing education policies and a significant contributor to setting the policy agenda, shaping the content of policies and keeping certain educational issues out of the public eye. The media appear to constitute a hitherto largely unseen hand helping to steer education policy and, through silence on certain issues, to inhibit them from becoming the subject of policy.

However, the media cannot be characterised simply as an organ of the state: media professionals act according to values which do not fully coincide with those of politicians or education professionals. Yet the way in which the media operate is constrained, in turn, by their location within a capitalist economy. For media professionals, survival depends on the purchase of their output, income from advertising, or a licence fee allocated by central government. Despite the ability of media professionals to investigate and comment critically on education policy makers and their policies, freedom for the media to manoeuvre is bounded by the often unseen hands of the economy and the state.

The following sections will consider how media professionals make up an interest group competing with others seeking an impact on education policy; how they and other interest groups interact within the policy process; and how the discourse of media output supports the struggle between political ideologies, its bias constituting a conservative influence inhibiting the search for radical alternatives to the present range of education policies. The argument will be illustrated with findings from ongoing exploratory research funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

A key objective of the research is to develop a conceptualisation of mass media involvement in the education policy process; the interim outcome of this effort forms the focus of the present paper. There are several areas of data collection:

- interviews are being conducted with a sample of media professionals and representatives of other groups concerned with education policy and the media;
- education policy areas covering mainstream schooling which were addressed by the national media over the calendar year 1994 have been monitored by sampling the output of the education press and news and current affairs broadcasts;
- a case study is being conducted of a recent national debate about progressive education.

**Controlling Interests**

The process of formulating and implementing education policies involves groups at central, local and institutional levels within the education system. Members of these groups use such resources as are available to realise their perceived interests. Major interest groups include politicians, teachers, parents, and students in post-compulsory education. Each group may be subdivided where interests differ, as in the case of politicians from opposing parties who promote contradictory policies. The output of the mass media is a key resource which enables interest groups to try and persuade others to accept what they want or to criticise opposing views. Each interest group seeks media coverage which both favours its perspective and supports it in deriding the opposition.

Yet media professionals have interests of their own. They must capture an audience, and so hold a varied range of 'news values' (Barrat 1986) governing the selection and interpretation of policy related statements and events. A different mix of these values informs the reporting of news, the writing of feature articles, and the production of current affairs programmes. The following examples of the expression of news values are taken from the half hour television broadcasts of the BBC Nine O'Clock News and ITV News at Ten between December 1993 and December 1994. They included a focus on:

- the central government education agenda - most items related to its policies. The opposition parties were represented primarily in terms of their response to government announcements. Only the very occasional launch of opposition policy statements or internal conflict over particular policies attracted equivalent coverage of the opposition;

- problems with government policy - a report generalised from the ballot in a Scottish school rejecting the opportunity to become grant maintained (funded directly by central government) to claim that this policy was a failure throughout Scotland;

- personalities - in July 1994 the Secretary of State for Education was dismissed from the Cabinet of central government and a new one appointed. Coverage relating to the new incumbent included a focus on her family background, past employment, experience as a local councillor, and aspirations;

- incompetence and failure - coverage at this time also highlighted the follies and gaffs of the outgoing Secretary of State, especially his agreement to pay substantial libel damages to the chief education officer of Birmingham local education authority (LEA) to whom he had publicly referred as a 'nutter' and a 'madman', claiming that he harmed schools;

- hypocrisy or double standards - the leader of the main opposition party elected to send his son to a local grant maintained school rather than to a school maintained by the LEA. The official line of his party was to oppose the creation of such schools which enjoyed more favourable funding than their LEA maintained counterparts;

- novelty - the first two schools judged by new national inspection arrangements to be failing their pupils made the headlines. Those identified subsequently did not;

- conflict - reports on these two schools included interviews with parents who disagreed with the inspectors' judgement (but no indication was given of whether any parents agreed with it);

- sensationalism - the murder of a schoolgirl by an intruder into a secondary school classroom was given top billing, and a minister was asked if the government was going to adopt a policy of tightening up security.

News values encompass not only the perceived newsworthiness of education stories, but also their competitive strength relative to other kinds of story. During 1994, only about one in five Nine O'Clock News or News at Ten bulletins carried an education policy related item. Even where education was covered, the item was usually well down the running order (around sixth) of the dozen or so items that made up the bulletin.

The profile of news values expressed in the presentation of education stories varies with the political values of individual journalists and programme makers, the dominant values underpinning editorial policy, and the legal framework within which they operate. In Britain, the laws of press ownership allow for political allegiance, which is mostly to the Conservative Party (Baker 1994), and also for critique of politicians in government or opposition. On the other hand television and radio are required to be politically impartial, a rule widely interpreted as meaning that a balance must be provided between opposing views. Members of interest groups other than the media are not in a position to make certain that their message will actually be conveyed or that they will be presented in a favourable light by the media except through such means as occasional political broadcasts allocated to parties, articles commissioned by the press, or press advertisements.

Media professionals can subscribe to values which are not necessarily aligned with those of education policy makers or people on the receiving end of these policies. For this reason they seem to constitute a key interest group with considerable power to convey, reinterpret or withhold messages of other groups. There is an oligarchic tendency in the interaction between interest groups, some (such as government politicians, businesspeople and right wing policy advocates) having disproportionate influence while others (like students, researchers, parents and minority ethnic groups) having relatively little impact on policy. The media help to empower or to marginalise other groups. There is a striking contrast between the amount of media coverage of central government's grant maintained schools policy and the lack of media attention to changing arrangements for funding specialist English language teaching support for pupils from minority ethnic groups. This latter policy shift is likely to have dire consequences for the education (and therefore life chances) of minority ethnic groups and the jobs of thousands of support staff.

The education policy process reflects a shifting balance of power within the network of interest groups which include the media, no one group having abolute control. Groups interact within a 'dialectic of control' (Giddens 1984), each group having relative autonomy in so far as each is partially autonomous and partly dependent on the others. Politicians depend on teachers to implement policies in state schools; teachers depend on politicians to allocate resources.

There is a unique relationship of 'mutual parasitism' between media professionals and other groups, most especially politicians and education professionals, each leaning on the other to pursue its own (often incompatible) ends. Media professionals depend on politicians and education professionals as a source of education stories and a significant element of their audience, yet they also have a 'licence to thrill': they can bite the hand that feeds through critical coverage or exposure of the negative consequences of policies, in order to inform and, ultimately, entertain the wider public audience on whom their survival depends. In line with the news value of sensationalism, there was extensive media coverage of a sex education lesson in a primary school where the nurse giving the lesson was asked questions about oral sex by pupils whose older siblings had put them up to it. Tabloid newspapers claimed that the nurse was teaching oral sex to children who should not know about it at such a tender age, as opposed to merely attempting to respond to their questions. It was implied that present sex education policy allowed such practices; the central government response was to order an enquiry into the incident and subsequently to make policy amendments.

Conversely, the other groups seek to benefit from favourable media exposure which will assist in gaining acceptance of their view (and, equally, attempt to avoid critical media coverage). Representatives of the National Union of Teachers made a sustained effort

during most of 1994 to make their case via the media for continuing to boycott national tests which central government ministers were trying to persuade teachers to implement.

Mutual dependency means that control of education is loose: one interest group may delimit the actions of another, prescribing the boundaries of possible action, but considerable room for manoeuvre remains within these limits. No group has sufficient power to direct the actions of others. To the extent that media professionals are empowered to act within the dialectic of control according to their own values, they may be typified as a 'loose cannon', capable of creating education stories that favour or damn any other group and able to ignore issues they do not wish to publicise. The media are not entirely uncontrollable, however, because of their dependence on securing an audience and the potential of politicians to curb their activities by recourse to legislation. The media may operate as a loose cannon, but not as a free agent.

**The Language of Myth and Counter Myth**

There is considerable overlap between the ways of thinking and communicating employed by politicians and media professionals, even though they are driven by different imperatives. Political discourse is designed to convince voters and gain the compliance of those who have to implement policies. It tends to proceed by simple assertion and generalisation, often with little evidential backing, which supports the policies of one party while being antagonistic to those of the opposition parties. Political points often may be scored more safely by deriding opposing views than by offering positive policies which then become a hostage to fortune since they are prey to opposition attack. Media professionals tend also to communicate through a language and imagery which simplify social reality, since they must attract, entertain and retain a mass audience with limited specialised knowledge of the policy area in question.

The interests of politicians and media professionals converge where they both employ a largely one way form of communication based on simple messages, exemplified in the use of short 'soundbites' and slogans which are the diet of television and tabloid newspapers - the media that reach the highest proportion of the population. To an increasing extent, politicians are required to think soundbite if their views are to be relayed by the media. Spin doctors and speech writers concentrate on producing aphorisms that will capture media attention. Early in 1994, the Prime Minister adopted a 'back to basics' theme as the umbrella for a range of policies. Launching new guidelines on pupil discipline, the Secretary of State for Education claimed that they were part of the 'back to basics' thrust.

The media therefore influence the form that education policy discourse takes. This discourse of derision may be conceived, following Bailey (1977), as a contest between myths and counter myths. He defined myth as 'an oversimplified representation of a more complex reality'. Myths are the currency for advancing one view in the face of an opposing perspective. Bailey argued that 'politics is the art of bringing unacceptable myths into, and preserving one's own myths from derision'. The more public the debate, suggested Bailey, the simpler and less reconcilable become the myths and counter myths.

There is ample evidence that the larger the projected audience of much media output, the simpler the political messages conveyed. Treatment of educational issues by television news broadcasts and investigative programmes tends to be more superficial than the BBC radio equivalents; yet television attracts much the larger audience. Similarly, coverage by the high circulation tabloid press tends to be more simplistic and sensational than that of the lower circulation broadsheet newspapers. This contrast is typified in the headlines of stories covering the announcement mentioned earlier that the Secretary of State for Education, John Patten, would pay libel damages. A tabloid newspaper with a circulation of four million copies carried the headline: PATTEN FACES SACK AFTER NUTTER JIBE. A broadsheet paper with one tenth the circulation of the tabloid stated: EDUCATION SECRETARY APOLOGISES UNRESERVEDLY FOR CALLING OFFICIAL A

'NUTTER' WHO HARMED SCHOOLS. PATTEN FACES £80,000 LEGAL BILL FOR LIBEL.

**Media and the Policy Process**

Recent studies of the education policy process have highlighted the elasticity of linkages between interest groups within and between levels of the education system (Ball 1990; Fullan 1991; Wallace 1991) resulting in considerable 'mutual adaptation' between policy as formulated and its implementation. In a context of multiple education reform, where policies interact and frequent readjustments have to be made, the policy process resembles more a continuous dialectic among interest groups and interacting policies than a linear sequence of policy development followed by implementation. Bowe and Ball (1992) suggest that policy formulation and implementation interpenetrate, and separate out two elements of the arena in which education policy is generated. Their process model consists of three mutually influential contexts:

- the context of influence, within and around central government, where interest groups such as politicians and their political advisers may debate fundamental purposes and broad policy ideas. Much of this context lies outside the public domain. The media are seen to play a supporting or challenging role within such of the context that is public:

- the context of text production, where civil servants including inspectors, government quango officials, and sometimes education professionals engage in negotiation that often produces official policy texts diverging from their initiators' intent;

- the context of practice, at the more local level, where policy texts are reinterpreted as they are adapted to meet the interests of implementors such as teachers.

Policies are continually in flux: evaluation of their impact, frequently while they are still being introduced, may stimulate interest groups within the context of influence to modify the original policy or develop something new. National testing arrangements, some of which had not got beyond the pilot stage, underwent drastic modification as a consequence of a boycott by teaching unions beginning in 1993. The National Curriculum itself, to be introduced in phases between 1989 and 1997, was radically revised in 1994, before the original version had been fully implemented.

Research on the media suggests that there is a missing ingredient in this model of the education policy process: the media context (see Figure 1). This context may be placed in the middle of the triangle formed by the contexts of influence, text production, and practice. It consists of the media process:

- the selection of issues, according to news and other media professional values, from material sought or received from interest groups in the other three contexts;

- production of myth and counter myth whose characteristics vary according to the intended mass audience;

- output which may be received by interest groups in the other three contexts and by the wider public.

(INSERT FIGURE 1)

Of course interest groups in these three contexts communicate without the media, whether through circulars from the Department for Education (DFE) or publications from quangos sent to schools, through returns from schools to the DFE and quangos, or through directives from ministers to quangos and reports from quangos to ministers. However, media professionals monitor such communications (as indicated by the dotted lines in the diagram)

as a source of stories; and politicians and education professionals take steps to inform the media through such means as media releases (the DFE sends out over 400 per year), the open circulation or leaking of documents, and events like press conferences and photo opportunities. Party political broadcasts or advertisements in the press enable politicians to bypass selection of material by media professionals.

Not surprisingly, much information received in the three contexts other than the media - especially within the context of practice and among the wider public - is gleaned from media output. The specialist education press reaches school or college staffrooms. Many policy shifts are heralded on television and radio before reaching newspapers the following day, and government documents often arrive in schools or colleges long after media interpretations and comment have reached the target audience. Civil servants, other officials and politicians are likely to read quality newspapers and the specialist education press, and to follow the broadcast news.

The media are themselves monitored by politicians and many education professionals: the Information Branch at the DFE keeps a constant watch on media output, informing government ministers of reactions to their policy changes and alerting them to issues unearthed by the media to which they may have to respond; the office of a major teachers' union employs a press cuttings agency to keep track of education stories. The media are evidently part and parcel of the education policy process, but is their contribution all froth and no substance?

**Media Discourse: A Conservative Ideology?**

The centrality of the media in the education policy process creates conditions where the selection and 'angle' (or bias) of media output may influence policy intentions, the form taken by official texts, and the practices of those who are required to implement policies. On the surface, it appears that the media contribution is mostly froth but also a little substance. It is possible to identify instances where media coverage has helped shape the policy agenda (as in the case of the sex education scandal); where interest groups have been marginalised through negative coverage; or where its silence on issues (like the funding of specialist support for pupils from minority ethnic groups) contributes to their repression.

Yet there is more to media froth than meets the eye: it both creates and constrains the way we perceive the social world and so may influence how we act. The myths and counter myths of media discourse amount to ideological struggle where they both convey an incomplete view of social reality and are supportive of partisan political interests. In relaying others' messages, we would expect media discourse to reflect the clash between politicians' ideologies. Media influence on the content of education policy relates to which ideologies receive an airing and which are repressed, depending on the prevailing mix of news and other media values, their impact on the mass audience, and the significance of this impact for politicians in government and in opposition. On specific policy issues the ideological underpinnings of media accounts are often clear, as where prior to the last general election national newspapers aligned with the Conservative Party supported its education policies and attacked those of the opposition.

However, the very froth of media discourse may also make a significant subliminal contribution which is consequently more difficult to demonstrate, so here I am being more speculative. The licence to thrill leads to presentation of the world of education as both theatre and comedy. First, media emphasis on the central government agenda and opposition response, on conflict and failure, on novelty and sensation, portrays an image of education as perennially turbulent. The humdrum world of everyday practice is not news. Over time, the consistent reporting of educational problems may support politicians in engendering a sense of 'moral panic' (Cohen 1972) amongst voters: the impression that there is something wrong with education, which politicians are here to put right.

Significantly, a recent opinion poll of parents conducted by MORI (1994) found that 83% of parents with children at state secondary schools were satisfied with the education their children were receiving, as against only 74% when the question was asked in a similar survey conducted in 1987 (prior to implementation of the central government's reform agenda). Satisfaction with primary schools was rated even higher at 86%. A positive mark for the reforms? Apparently not: almost half (48%) disagreed that recent changes in the education system had improved the standard of education in this country and only a quarter (24%) agreed that they had improved standards. It seems that parents were increasingly satisfied with their children's schooling, of which they had first hand evidence. Their less positive impression of the national picture with regard to impact of central government reforms could only have been gained at second hand: through the media. Possibly, for maybe a majority of parents, their own children's schooling was perceived as an exception to the media influenced rule that reform had failed to bring about improvement in educational standards.

Second, the realm of theatre is actually quite narrowly defined. The ideologies over which conflict rages are restricted, ranging from those of the political centre left to the radical right wing (Jones 1991) and represent only those interest groups to which the media give a voice. Arguably, the press supporting the Conservative Party effectively marginalised left wing radicals during the 1980s, branding them as the 'loony left' and so inviting readers not to take their ideas seriously. The way media professionals operate is also quite self-regulating: they monitor each other's output assiduously, ensuring that they learn about any story that has been covered by rivals, often deciding to follow their lead. A recurrent anxiety for journalists and editors is that they may fail to push a story that turns out to be given 'splash' coverage by their rivals. It seems plausible that the consensual view of the world which emerges amounts to a conservative media ideology in its own right, assisting in keeping the permanent crisis of education within familiar horizons that do not address enduring social inequalities in which education is implicated.

Third, a consensual view is reinforced by the form of most media discourse as a trade in more or less simplistic myth and counter myth. The lowest common denominator of a mass audience is the stock of existing assumptions which make up 'common sense'. Media output that sticks with the categories of common sense is likely to be understood by the maximum number of people. Radical ideas challenge common sense and employ unfamiliar language, running the risk of being difficult to grasp and so becoming a turn-off for a mass audience seeking light entertainment rather than heavy challenge.

Fourth, since so much media discourse is about derision (especially in the tabloid press and on television) the focus on personalities, incompetence and sensation fosters an image of the education policy process as farce: it belittles the protagonists and so trivialises the substantive policy issues at stake. A question arises over how far this image may engender cynicism about the integrity of politicians and the ability of their policies to make a difference, and hence helps to reinforce the status quo. The need for media professionals to avoid their policy related output being perceived as boring, and so not worth watching, hearing or reading may have the unintended consequence of promoting a media ideology where education is presented as something not to be taken too seriously. Members of the audience are kept happy while attention is deflected from the implications of education policy for their own life chances and those of their children.

A conservative media ideology has greater affinity with the appeal to tradition and common sense of the Conservative Party than with the more radical ideas of opposition groups. The media loose cannon may therefore be directed more often at the political left than the right.

**Conclusion: the Unseen Hand of Relative Autonomy**

Why do media professionals operate as a loose cannon - independent commentators and critics who, nevertheless, may also be subtle promoters of a conservative ideology? They work within one of four social institutions (or patterns of relationships between interest

groups) which are intimately connected with the dialectic of control over education: the media, education, the capitalist economy and the state (central government and its agencies, including schools and colleges). The relationship between each may be conceived as one of relative autonomy, implying an elastic linkage which allows considerable independence within the limits imposed by mutual dependence (Figure 2).

(INSERT FIGURE 2)

Formal education exists partly to supply the compliant and skilled workforce of the future to a capitalist economy. The state is dependent on the economy as the source of income through taxation and borrowing, but a range of policies may be followed within broad limits imposed by the need for finance. Dale (1986) has argued that relative autonomy between the economy and the state enables a variety of interest groups to influence education policy, although a small number have greatest control over the education policy process. Education policy contributes to creating conditions which are not inimical to capitalism, which legitimate capitalism, and in most cases actually assist in capital accumulation. In recent years central government education policy has become more explicitly linked to the aim of enhancing wealth creation, even extending to enterprise initiatives in primary schools.

Coverage by the media contributes both to the formulation of education policy and to the creation of conditions where it will be accepted by education professionals and the general public. We have seen how media output attends closely to central government policy but can also challenge it. Similarly, analysts of the media such as Murdoch and Golding (1977) have argued that, more generally, there is relative autonomy between the media and the state since the government can be criticised. However, we have already noted the limits imposed by the mutual parasitism between media professionals and politicians. Media professionals are wary of steering so close to the wind as to risk alienating, and so losing, the contacts who are the source of their stories, or of inviting government censure.

The interrelationship between these institutions is evident in the policy area of pre-school education in Britain. Throughout 1994, the media reported how representatives of various interest groups (first the Prime Minister, followed swiftly by members of opposition parties and other groups) were advocating an increase in the provision of pre-school education. A widely articulated reason was to render Britain economically more competitive. The major constraint was reported to be its cost. Conservative politicians argued that the state should not take responsibility for (and therefore finance) the whole of any expansion, but should create favourable conditions for private sector provision. Central government, which initiated much media coverage, appears to have used the media as a means of testing public reaction before committing ministers to a policy which could have expensive consequences for their economic thrust of keeping down state expenditure.

To sum up, the media contribution to the education policy process is affected by the considerable degree of autonomy media professionals enjoy, giving them licence to thrill by expressing their news values, to interpret, to generalise, and to decide whether to relay other interest groups' messages. This contribution is nevertheless limited by constraints on media freedom imposed by dependence on other interest groups and institutions. Output and its underlying conservative ideology is moulded by editorial policy reflecting the ownership of the press and much of broadcasting by a small number of multinational conglomerates, themselves capitalist enterprises; by the state imposed legal framework which sets boundaries over what may be said or shown; by the need of media professionals to keep their sources of stories reasonably sweet; and by the necessity of entertaining a mass audience in order to secure income.

There is little evidence to support a conspiracy theory of deliberate connivance between media professionals, government ministers or businesspeople achieving tight control over the arena of education debate and policy. Rather, the relationship itself - of relative autonomy between the media, education, the state and the economy - appears to be the

unseen hand which guides interaction between interest groups which are involved or marginalised, resulting in a media contribution that is critical within limits, but also fundamentally conservative. Such a contribution does not square well with the principle so often proclaimed by politicians that, in a liberal democracy like Britain, all voices are entitled to be heard.

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**Figure 1: Location of the Media within the Education Policy Process**

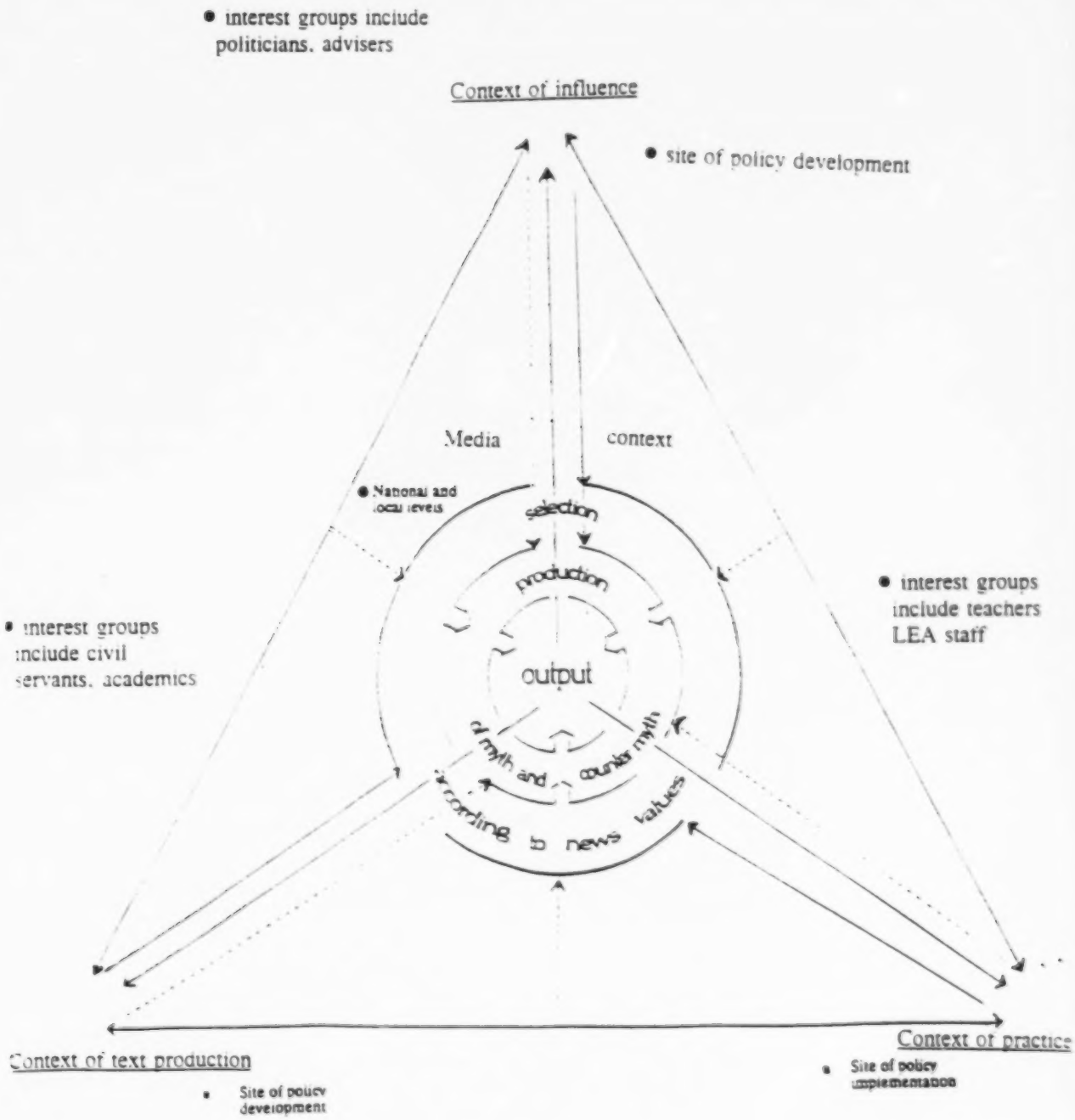




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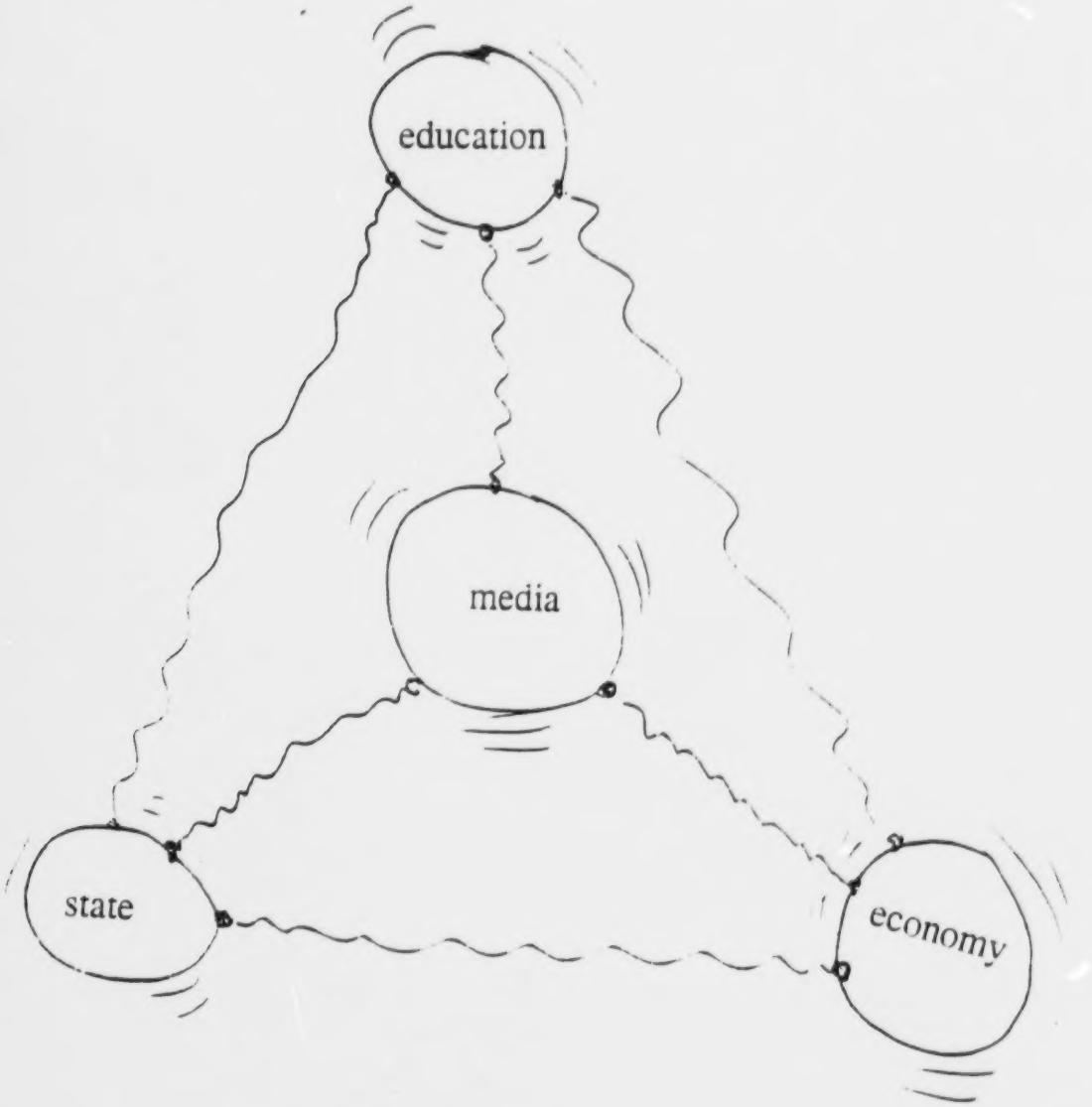
**Figure 2: Relative Autonomy between Institutions Affecting Education Policy**

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